The Lost Honor of Kathryn Beck: A German Story on American Television

Heinrich Böll's story*Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* was published in German in 1974.[1] According to the author, the book was inspired by the treatment of Peter Brückner, a professor in Hannover, because of his alleged association with the Baader-Meinhof group.[2] An English translation by Leila Vennewitz appeared in 1975.[3] The work gained an even wider audience with the release of Volker Schlöndorff's film adaptation that same year.[4] The Schlöndorff film has been the subject of several scholarly articles.[5] On Tuesday, January 24, 1984 *The Lost Honor of Kathryn Beck*, an American adaptation made expressly for television, was shown on the CBS television network, giving Böll's story its widest exposure to date.

In Böll's story Katharina Blum is a decent, industrious young housekeeper living in West Berlin who attends a party where she meets a young man named Ludwig Götten, who she later learns is wanted by the police. Katherina and Götten spend the night together in her apartment. The next morning police storm the apartment and, when they discover Götten has fled, treat Katharina as if she herself were a criminal. She is interrogated repeatedly by the police and slandered by the newspaper *Die Zeitung*. Within a few short days her life is destroyed. She agrees to meet with the unscrupulous *Zeitung* reporter Tötges, calmly shoots him and turns herself over to the authorities.

As in *Ende einer Dienstfahrt* (1966) and *Gruppenbild mit Dame* (1971), Böll uses here the device of the objective narrator who has pieced his report together from various, sometimes conflicting sources.[6] In order to prove the veracity and objectivity of his information, the *Katharina Blum* narrator lists his sources in the first paragraph. The presentation of the story's events on film is "necessarily more direct" than Böll's narrative, to borrow a phrase from William and Joan Magretta's analysis of Schlöndorff's film version of *Katharina Blum*[7] Both the German film and the American television version present the bulk of the events in strict chronological order. Both permit us, literally, to see Katharina, who is never directly described in the story, and to witness the things that happen to her, some of which are dispensed with in a few sentences in the story. The reporter is also more visually present in the two film versions, while in Böll's story he was more of an abstraction, an allegorical representative of the media at their most ruthless.[8] Most of these differences stem from the essential difference in medium: prose narrative and film.

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